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ABSTRACT

The relationship between world hunger and world population is explored in this document for high school global education classes. Reasons for the high birth rates in developing nations are suggested, e.g., a poor family has many children because children are an inexpensive work force, provide extra income, and care for parents in old age. The author argues that overpopulation in developing countries and overconsumption in wealthy nations leads to inequitable distribution of the world's resources. He also points to the failure of birth control programs in third world countries and suggests that the benefits of development (e.g., health care and sanitation services, education, and community support groups) could do much to decrease the birth rate. Ideas for action and a brief list of reference materials are included. (KC)

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# HUNGER AND POPULATION

FACTS FOR ACTION NO. 7

Apr 83

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Oxfam America, Boston, MA

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# Facts For Action
An Oxfam America Educational Publication #7 25¢

# Hunger and Population

Yellamanchili, India: Young mothers can use a balwadi (day care center), join a women's thrift society, or learn dairying and vegetable gardening through the Bhagavatula Charitable Trust.
Oxfam America photo by Marty Chen

"What is done to meet the challenges of poverty, ill-health and hunger is a primary contribution to checking population growth. In the final analysis, it is development itself that will provide the most propitious environment for stabilizing the world's population at tolerable levels"

(**North-South: A Program for Survival. The Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues under the Chairmanship of Willy Brandt,** 1980).

## A Broader Perspective

Padma Saldanha is 25. She has lived all her life in a village in Bangladesh. Padma has had five children, but three of them are dead. Her second-born died a week after birth, the third was stillborn, and the most recent died of a fever at five months of age. Padma's first and fourth children, both girls, help her with household chores. Her husband Hari, a peasant farmer, wants more children. Padma doesn't. She is already tired from too much work, too little to eat and too much worry about the family's meagre income. "I'm too weak," she says, "another birth will ruin me." But Hari has threatened to leave her and take another wife if Padma does not have a son. "That, too, would ruin me," she says.

Are there too many people like Padma? Are there too many people in the world? Is that why 800 million of us go to bed hungry every night? Is it also why, in an "average" year, 15 million people die of hunger-related causes?

The relationship between the **hunger** of people and the **number** of people is complex, but the world's survival depends upon a broad perspective on the food-people issue.

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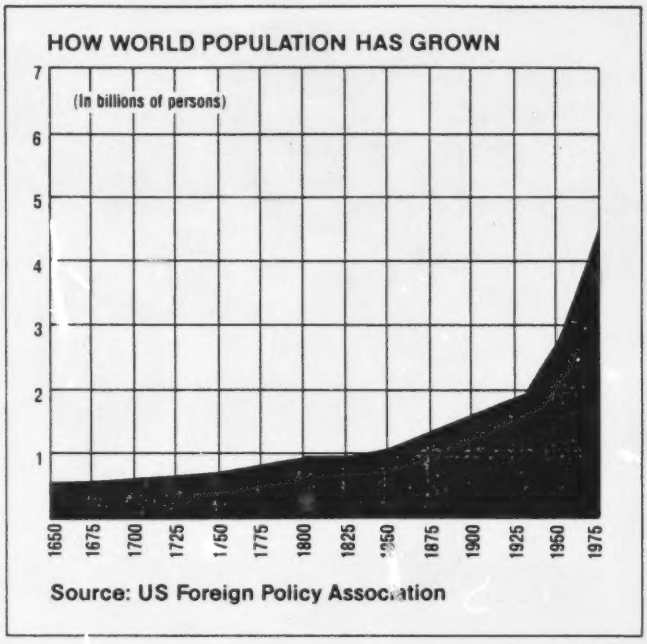
## World Population Patterns

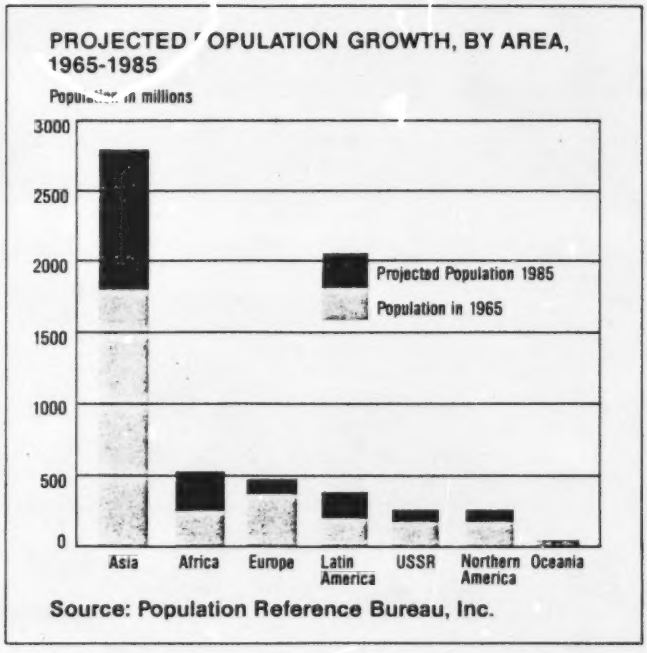
The United Nations estimates the world's population is now around 4.5 billion and is currently increasing by as much as 75 million a year. World population could reach 6.25 or even 7 billion by the year 2000. The world did not contain one billion people until the year 1830, and that figure did not double for another century. Currently, however, world population is doubling every 50 years or less.

A quick glance at current world population trends might make you think that the world's poor people and developing countries are the real reason for this increase. 92 percent of the total world population increase during the next few decades is expected to occur in the poor countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America – countries and areas which still have the highest rates of population increase.

The reasons for this pattern of world population growth have much to do with the unequal distribution of resource control and the benefits of development among the world's people.

For example, the majority of people in the wealthy industrial countries have enjoyed improved medical and health care, better living conditions and nutrition, improved public sanitation facilities, higher wages, and social security systems or retirement pensions during much of the past century. At first, these benefits increased population in the wealthy countries because more infants lived to maturity, and more adults and children lived longer. Eventually, such improvements brought changes in the lifestyles of people in the wealthy countries. In the United States and Britain, for example, people began to have fewer children and smaller families. National birth rates have declined.




By contrast, hundreds of millions of people in the poor countries still lack the most basic improvements in living standards. Family size and numbers of children among these people have remained large. If the benefits and wealth of development were equitably shared with the hundreds of millions in poor countries, there is reason to expect that population growth in the poor countries would also decline. Where the benefits of development have been shared, and where people have had some control over the resources they need to live, family size and numbers of births have declined over time:

"When they put the new water pipe in our village, I no longer had to spend so much time going to get water from three miles away. If more improvements come soon, my husband and I might be able to think of having children because we want to, rather than because we need them to help us work..." (A woman in Zimbabwe).

"Since they started the new clinic and we get good free medical care, fewer children die now. My husband agrees that we should only have two or three, and try to keep them in better health with the help of the clinic." (A woman in Nicaragua).

Providing opportunities for steady, well-paid employment can also be an important help to people in reducing their reliance on many children for economic security.

## Overpopulation versus Overconsumption

"It is clear that as long as the available food supply is distributed according to commercial demand rather than nutritional needs, the over-consumption in the rich countries will be an important cause of hunger and malnutrition (among the poor) in years of food shortages." (**Proceedings of the World Food Conference,** Rome, 1976)

Inequitable distribution of the world's resources and of the benefits of development affects the food-people equilibrium in another way, as well. Nearly 70 percent of all the food consumed worldwide in any recent average year was consumed by people in the wealthy countries – not by the world's poor. While Padma Saldanha and her neighbors ate the equivalent of about 400 pounds of grain last year, the average North American consumed the equivalent of nearly 2000 pounds of grain, mostly as meat, dairy products, and alcoholic beverages. Against the overpopulation of the poor countries, we must see the overconsumption by the rich countries, if we are to gain perspective on the world's food/people equation.

Many people have begun to see that the food/people issue is less a problem of too little food and too many people, than a problem of how food – and the productive resources – is distributed.

An Indian journalist is reported to have begun a recent speech on world affairs by saying, "We worry every time another American is born, because Americans consume so much."

Tanzania: Women attend government nutrition lecture, 1969.
Unicef photo by Alastair Matheson

## A Closer Look at Birth Control Programs

Alarmed at the rising numbers of poor people in the Third World countries, many governments and agencies have initiated birth control programs in recent years to help reduce population. Generally, these programs have assumed that the way to reduce births is to provide poor people with effective means of birth control.

"Developing countries will not be able to prosper with high rates of population growth and cannot wait for general development to bring down birth rates. Indeed, the danger is that birth rates will bring down development," was how one official of the U.S. Agency for International Development expressed it.

In many developing countries, however, a long history of inequity and repression has made the poor suspicious of the motives of the authorities, who now come admonishing the poor to have fewer children. Poor people may see birth control programs as merely another way for the wealthy and powerful to help themselves, perhaps under the guise of national development. Racial and ethnic minorities sometimes see population control for the poor as a means of political control by the rich.

El Chaguiton, Nicaragua: Woman coffee workers prepare young plants for field planting.
Oxfam America photo by Lawrence Simon

Oxfam America

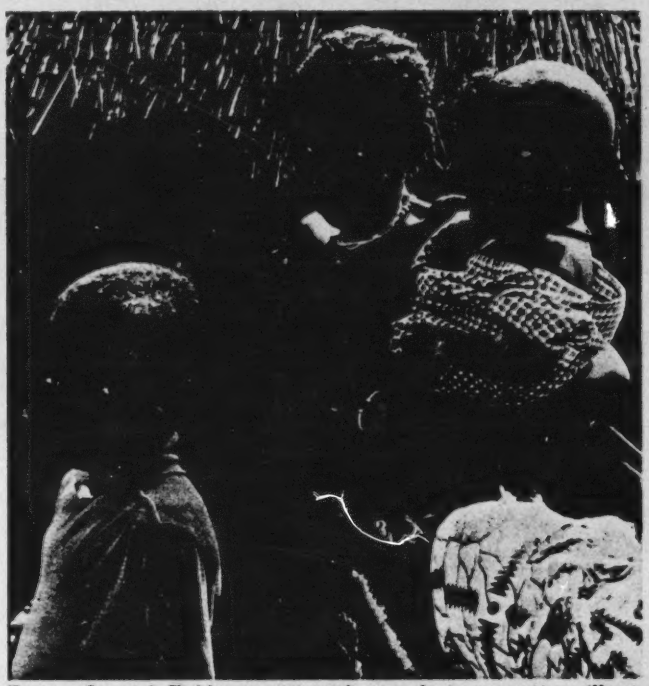
"Birth control a plot to kill Black people," was the stark message painted on walls in Kingston, Jamaica, during a recent government-sponsored birth control program in that country. In such situations, some oppressed people and minorities have reacted by encouraging their groups to have **more** children.

Well-intended birth-control programs are sometimes insensitive to the people for whom the programs are intended. This sometimes increases the suspicions of the poor about such programs. In Padma Saldanha's village, for example, government workers brought birth control pills and told local women to use them. They neglected to tell the women **how** to use the pills, however, thinking the women could read for themselves the instructions on the containers. But most of the women were illiterate. Some took too many pills too fast and became ill. Attributing their sickness to the pills, some women stopped taking the pills altogether.

Carefully planned and sensitively administered birth control programs may make an important contribution to helping third world people reduce the numbers of children they have. But such programs are most effective within a larger approach to human development which puts the security and empowerment of poor people, not the reduction of births, as its first priority.

## Seeing Is Believing

The relationship between hunger and population is complex. Seeing is believing for many of the world's people who must see real improvements in their lives – leading toward real security for themselves and their families – before they are willing to risk having fewer children. Seeing is believing for oppressed peoples who must see that development and birth control programs really put their interests first – not the interests of others – before they will readily accept such programs.



Eastern Senegal: Children wait to pick up malaria prevention pills at a village pharmacy, part of the Kedougou rural health project.
Oxfam America photo by Leslie Tuttle

Koudriere, Upper Volta: Farm women learn dressmaking at a government social center, 1970.
UN F.A.O. photo by Banoun/Caracciolo

Oxfam America approaches the hunger-population issue by supporting projects which work toward larger community social and economic goals rather than programs specifically focused on population control.

The Self-Employed Women's Program in India and the Jamalpur Women's Program in Bangladesh, both funded by Oxfam America, are two examples. In both, women work for themselves, engage in their own businesses, and become economically more secure and self-reliant. They set up clinics and learn nutrition and child care, as well as other skills. While the full impact of such projects cannot be known for some time, Oxfam America believes that as these women improve the health of their children, as they provide themselves with more secure work and incomes, as they lessen their dependency upon others, and as respect for them increases in the community, they will find that they can choose to reduce the numbers of children they have.

Seeing is believing. Oxfam America's experience with equitable self-help development which puts people first, has made us believe that this approach is a powerful way to address the hunger-population issue.

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Colomoncagua, Honduras. Salvadoran refugees develop light industry for cash incomes, summer 1982.
Oxfam America photo by Rusty Davenport

## Ideas for Action

**Form a study group** with friends, colleagues or members of your school or congregation. Select a facilitator and discuss further the connections between overpopulation and hunger. You want to help each person understand and be able to articulate the issues. Use the list of further readings as study material.

**Educate your community** to a fuller understanding of the causes of hunger. Encourage teachers and ministers to use this and other Oxfam America FACTS FOR ACTION in their educational work. Ask the minister to give a short talk on the topic – or offer to give such a talk yourself if you feel capable. A good film for teachers to use on population issues is **3900 Million and One,** a 55 minute, 16 mm film available from Oxfam America.

**Write letter to your local newspapers.** Be sure to reply with information when letters or articles appear claiming that overpopulation is the cause of hunger. Encourage people to support development programs which address the real sources of poverty and injustice. Write similar letters to your congressional representatives. Inform them about the issues and ask that they work for U.S. development policies which enable people to improve the quality of their lives and the health and security of their children.

**Organize a hunger awareness event** in your community. Encourage people to support the work of Oxfam America-sponsored projects, which are helping people overcome the poverty and insecurity that make large families a necessity. Two good films for increasing sensitivity to the issues facing Third World people are: **Small Interventions: The Role of Women in India's Development,** a 12 minute slide-tape and **Habbanaae: The Animal of Friendship,** a 25 minute slide-tape about a tribe of nomadic herders in Niger. Both of these shows are produced by Oxfam America and may be rented for $15.

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**Oxfam America** is a nonprofit international development and disaster relief organization based in Boston. Oxfam America was founded in 1970. It is one of six autonomous Oxfams. There are two in Canada and one each in Great Britain, Australia and Belgium. The name "Oxfam" came from the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, founded in England in 1942. Building self-reliance is our most important goal. We fund local, grassroots groups in poor countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the United States, Oxfam America works to inform policymakers and the general public about the root causes of world hunger and poverty. Oxfam America neither seeks nor accepts government funds, but relies entirely upon gifts from private institutions and citizens.